

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Dinner in New York City

May 13, 2010

Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. It is good to be back in New York City. Love New York City.

I want to thank, first of all, Congressman Chris Van Hollen, who has one of the tougher jobs around. Let's face it: Whenever you are the chairman of the DCCC, the demands on your time, in addition to being a Member of Congress, all your committee assignments, and then you also have to go out there and help campaign for everybody, it is a tough job. And Chris is handling it with unbelievable class. And we are so grateful to him. Thank you, Chris.

To Congressman Steve Israel, thank you for the outstanding work that you've done as chair of recruiting. To all the distinguished Members of Congress, including the dean of the New York delegation, Charlie Rangel, and everybody else who is here, thank you for not only helping to organize the event tonight, but also for your incredible dedication and courage during the course of the past year and a half.

It is good to be back in New York City, and it is good to be following Nancy Pelosi. *[Laughter]* New York is a tough town, but Nancy Pelosi, that's one tough lady. *[Laughter]* That is one tough lady. And she's so elegant, even as she's ripping your heart out—*[laughter]*—if you mess with her.

You need to be tough to put up with all the criticism and griping that she deals with on a daily basis. And that's from the Democrats. *[Laughter]* But her toughness, her extraordinary leadership, is why she's not just going to go down in history as the first woman Speaker, she is going to go down as one of the greatest Speakers of all time. She has been unbelievable in her leadership in Congress.

Now, I also want to thank all of you, not just for your financial contributions, but for your time, your energy, your faith that America can move forward in the right direction. Your support has made an incredible difference, because 16 months ago, when we took office, we knew this wouldn't be easy. At least I hope you knew, because I told you. *[Laughter]* If you didn't know, you weren't paying attention at my Inauguration Address. *[Laughter]* Remember that? Washington, couple million people, really cold? *[Laughter]* We came in here with a whole host of challenges in our inbox, challenges the likes of which we hadn't seen in this country for decades.

Abroad, we were confronting a war in Iraq that needed to come to a responsible end and a war in Afghanistan that demanded greater attention and focus and a host of new threats and new dangers and new opportunities in a new world.

And here at home, we were facing a financial crisis that had the potential to plunge us into another great depression. We had a deficit crisis saddling our children with a mountain of debt, an economic crisis that was pounding families and small businesses all across the country—a lot of families who had already endured an awful lot during the previous decade. And even though we didn't cause these crises, we took the responsibility to end them.

That's why we asked the American people for the chance to lead in the first place. That's why Nancy Pelosi and all the Members of Congress here, the reason they ran wasn't to put off problems, but to solve problems. That was the reason I ran for President. And that meant we had to make some tough decisions.

Trust me, when I walked into the door of the Oval Office and found a \$1.3 trillion deficit after the previous administration had inherited a surplus, the last thing I wanted to do was spend money on a recovery package or become involved in the auto industry or prevent the collapse of Wall Street banks, particularly those whose irresponsibility had helped to cause this crisis. That wasn't on my campaign to-do list. You don't remember me campaigning on those items. *[Laughter]*

And they certainly weren't popular. We knew that. Sometimes these folks—I listen to these pundits, and they're saying, aw, the President's made this decision and his—these are unpopular decisions. I've got pollsters. *[Laughter]* I know when what we're about to do is politically unpopular. *[Laughter]* But what I also knew was that if we wanted to break the back of our recession and get our economy moving again, then the steps we took were absolutely necessary. And while we still have a long road ahead of us, we're beginning to see signs of progress all across America—all across America.

The economy that was shrinking a year ago, it's growing today. The economy that was bleeding jobs at a historic pace a year ago—750,000 jobs a month when I came in—now we're creating jobs again. Our economic heartbeat keeps growing stronger. These are good things, even if our friends on the other side of the aisle fall all over themselves to argue otherwise.

But here's the thing: The steady progress we're seeing, it didn't happen by accident. We're starting to see in public opinion surveys that people start thinking that the economy's getting better, but there seems to be a disconnect as to why it's getting better. The reason the economy's getting better is because Nancy Pelosi and every Democrat here embraced the responsibility to lead. It happened because they embraced the responsibility to stand up to special interests, stand up even against the prevailing political winds, stand up for the American people's interests. It happened because we embraced the responsibility to finally take on problems that Washington had talked about for years, sometimes decades, and put off over and over and over again. That's what this Congress has been doing. And it hasn't been easy. These guys have taken more tough votes in the last 16 months than Congress had taken in the previous 16 years. And that's the truth.

Think about it. For years, Washington had talked about how credit card companies were ripping off American families. Well, this was the Congress that passed the credit card bill of rights. For years, Washington talked about protecting our kids from tobacco companies. This was the Congress that stepped up and delivered and put a stop to those practices.

For years, Washington had talked about making sure our veterans got the care and benefits that was promised them. This was the Congress that increased funding for our veterans by more than we had done in a generation and guaranteed that it would arrive on time every year.

For years, Washington had talked about fixing the student loan system that favored financial interests over students and families. This was the Congress that finally made it happen. Over \$60 billion of funding that is now going to students to help them go to school happened because of the courageous votes that were taken by these Members of Congress.

For years, Washington talked about the need to transition to a clean and independent energy future. This was the Congress that made the biggest investment in clean energy in our history. And that investment is already reopening factories and rehiring workers to build wind turbines and solar panels and effectively create an advanced battery industry right here in America.

For nearly half—for nearly a century, we had been talking about the need for health insurance reform in America. And this was the Congress that delivered it for the American people.

So I want everyone in this room to be clear—I'm glad I got pictures with you, it was nice to schmooze with you a little bit, but the bottom line is, is that I could not have gotten done any of the things we got done had it not been for this team right here. And they did it despite all the gridlock, despite all the partisanship. This has been one of the most productive legislative sessions in history, in the midst of crisis.

If we just stopped now, in fact, if we had stopped last year, it would have already been one of the most productive legislative sessions in history. And that's tempting, stopping. *[Laughter]* Everybody's kind of pooped, but—particularly because it would've been nice to get a little help from the other side of the aisle, just once in a while. You would have thought at a time of historic crisis that Republican leaders would have been more willing to help us find a way out of this mess, particularly since they created the mess. *[Laughter]*

We all have a stake in cleaning it up. We're not Democrats or Republicans first; we're Americans first. I tell the story about—you know, sometimes you got a feeling Nancy and I are sitting—Charlie and Steve, everybody—Jerry, we're—got our mops and our brooms out, we're cleaning stuff out, and they're sitting there saying, "Hold the broom better." *[Laughter]* "That's not how you mop." *[Laughter]* Don't tell me how to mop. Pick up a mop. *[Laughter]* Do some work on behalf of the American people to solve some of these problems. *[Laughter]*

But that wasn't their strategy; it was not their strategy from day one. And I'm not making this up. This is public record. They've said in interviews, "We made a political decision. We stood nothing to gain from cooperating. We knew things were going to be bad. And we figured, if we didn't do anything and if it didn't work out so well, maybe the other side would take the blame."

They've done their best to gum up the works, to make things look broken, to say no to every single thing. That was the attitude they had when it came to pulling our economy out of a crisis. That was the attitude they had when it came to making sure that families and businesses finally got the security of health care in this country. That's been the attitude on any number of challenges that we faced. Their basic attitude's been, "If Democrats lose, we win."

So after they drove the car into the ditch, made it as difficult as possible for us to pull it back, now they want the keys back. *[Laughter]* No! *[Laughter]* You can't drive. We don't want to have to go back into the ditch. We just got the car out. We just got the car out. *[Laughter]*

Look, I just came from Buffalo. I spent some time with workers and families; they're still facing very tough economic times. A couple weeks ago, I spent time with folks in the Midwest. I've been trying to make it a habit of getting out of Washington as often as the job allows. And when I do, you know what's fascinating? None of the people you meet—and I'm not just seeing folks who have signed up to see me. We're stopping in diners, and we're talking to folks on the streets and on the farm, and they don't care which party puts points on the board. They're not talking about who's positioned better for November. They're not keeping track of what's going

on with the red team and the blue team. And they're not watching cable network news. They just want to know that somebody is looking out for them in Washington, that somebody's working hard. They want to see progress. They expect us to respond to our challenges with the same sense of urgency that they feel in their own lives. That's all they're looking for. They want to know that we're trying hard and that we've got their interests in mind.

And what I believe is when we win—we win when the American people win, that good policy is good politics. People wonder sometimes why it is that I stay calm. I stay calm because if I feel like I'm making the best decision possible that's good for the American people, then ultimately the American people are going to figure that out. And Nancy Pelosi and this caucus has the same attitude, because if they didn't, we would have made a whole bunch of different decisions.

And the American people are going to have a clear choice when they head into the polls in November. They're going to have a choice about whether they want somebody who has the courage to stand up in a time of need or would prefer somebody who sits on the sidelines and tries to cast blame. They're going to have a choice about whether you're going to make decisions that strengthen our country for the long term or that just serve your short-term political purposes. The American people will have a choice about whether or not we're going to keep rebuilding America that is stronger and more prosperous and more competitive than before, and that means making some tough choices now for our children and our grandchildren, or going back to the policies that got us into this mess in the first place.

And I am proud that for the past year and a half, under the leadership of the folks sitting in this room, the Democratic Party has taken the right path. It's cut taxes for 95 percent of America's working families, cut taxes for small businesses, for making college more affordable, for families buying their first home. Not just to reward those at the top, but instead to give a little bit of lift to folks on the bottom at a time when they were really in trouble. That's what Democrats were for, and the other side was against it.

We took on the special interests and fixed the broken student loan system that gave tens of billions of dollars to financial systems, unnecessary middlemen, and we put that money to work helping students all across America go to college and get the skills they need to win the race in this 21st century economy. That's what Democrats are for. You know what? The other side, it was against it.

We thought it was unfair to deny health insurance to Americans with preexisting conditions. We thought it was wrong to let hard-working families go bankrupt because somebody in their family gets sick. And so we did something about it that no Congress had done in American history. That's what we were for, and the other side was against it.

We fought for the principle that all of us ought to have a sense of security when it comes to our health care. And I truly believe that, and so does everybody in this room. And now they are talking about repealing it if they take over in November. They'd actually tell uninsured Americans with preexisting conditions, you know what, it's a mistake to ensure that you get coverage. They'd tell seniors, you know what, give back that help that you're getting when it comes to paying for your prescription drugs. They'd tell millions of small-business owners who today qualify for new tax credits to help them cover their workers and the millions of young Americans who can now stay on their parents' plan until they turn 26 years old, you know what, tough luck, you're on your own.

I'm not going to let that happen, Nancy's not going to let that happen, and I'm confident, as long as we're able to get our message out, with your help, the American people aren't going to let that happen.

Now, I'm not saying Democrats and Republicans ought to agree on everything. There are going to be some things we don't see eye to eye on, and a good, serious debate is good for our democracy. That's what this is all about. But the fact is, the problems that we face are too great for us to be playing politics all the time. And all of us, Democrats and Republicans, need to come together to solve problems. And that is what Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic Caucus has done. They have not played politics.

And now—[*applause*]*—*and frankly, that is not always politically convenient. We're engaged in a debate right now about commonsense Wall Street reform. Now, I was in Wall Street just a few weeks ago, and I said, I believe in the power of the free market; I believe in a strong financial system. When it's working right, our financial institutions are an enormous source of strength and dynamism in our economy. It helps families buy homes and businesses grow and ideas to take flight. There are a lot of good people who work in the financial industry who do things the right way. It's in our best interest to make sure those firms are strong and healthy.

But when these institutions operate irresponsibly, they don't just threaten themselves. As we've seen, they threaten the entire economy, along with the dreams of millions of Americans who worked so hard to make a life for themselves.

So we need reform that would ensure they operate in a honest, fair, open way. And we'll see who can stand up to the lobbyists and special interests who are trying to weaken this reform, even as we speak. We'll see who wants to get it done. Because all of us, Democrats and Republicans, have a responsibility to make sure the American people don't have to endure a crisis like this ever again.

All of us are going to have to tackle our exploding deficits. And I got to say, Washington, it's got a short-term memory, so people don't remember that it wasn't that long ago, under a Democratic President, that America enjoyed the hard-won budget surpluses. And yet it only took a few years of Republican Congresses, these same budget hawks, being in charge to turn that surplus into a massive deficit, passing a tax cut for the richest Americans, creating an expensive, new entitlement program, and authorizing two wars without paying for a single dime of it. And now suddenly we're in charge, and they say, "Hey, where did this deficit come from?" [*Laughter*]

Well, we will help clean up that mess too. That's why I've gone through our budget line by line to cut what we don't need so we can pay for what we do need. That's why I set up a bipartisan fiscal commission to look at our structural deficit, our long-term deficit, set a clear goal to cut our deficit in half over the next 3 years, because I don't want to kick our problems down the road. I don't want our children to have to deal with it.

And that's what all this comes down to. That's what Democrats have been about over the course of this last year and a half: What kind of future are we going to build and leave for the next generation? And I know this is a party fundraiser, this may be blasphemy to say so, but all of us has to ask ourselves one question: What is more important, doing what is easy to get through the next election or doing what's right for the next generation?

And the Democratic Party this year has answered that question. We chose to lead. We chose to make tough decisions. We chose not to spend all our time looking at the polls.

I remember the conversation Nancy and I had about health care at the beginning of the debate. And I told her, I said, I want to get this done, even if it meant that I was going to be a one-term President. I think it's that important. And Nancy—when everybody got all nervous after Massachusetts, she said, you know what, we're still going to get it done.

And we did what was necessary to rescue our economy. We've done what's necessary to resuscitate our economy and to rebuild it on a new foundation of growth and to turn this country around and point it in the right direction.

And, yes, we're going to take some lumps. But we can now see the contours of what's a more prosperous, more secure future for America, where new jobs and new industries in areas like clean energy and clean tech come back to within our borders, and you've got a highly trained, highly educated workforce that can compete for those jobs with any other workers in the world; and where more families and businesses are free to chase their dreams backed up by the security of health care; and where the future of the American Dream is once again within the reach of every American; and we've got a Government that works and is competent and has restored science to its rightful place and believes in civil liberties, and we have some folks on the Supreme Court who believe in the Constitution.

I—[*applause*]*—*that is the future that was—is within our sight. We've gone through a stormy time. And I know sometimes it's made you guys a little seasick—[*laughter*]*—*but right now the waters are calming, right there at the horizon, we can see our destination. So now's not the time to lose heart. Now's not the time to get complacent. Now's the time to remind ourselves of what America's all about and make sure we are working as hard as we can to return Democrats to the House of Representatives.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:59 p.m. at the St. Regis New York Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. Jerrold L. Nadler.

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automobiles; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Health and medical care : Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; Health and medical care : Seniors, prescription drug benefits; Health and medical care : Small businesses, tax credits to purchase insurance coverage; Health and medical care : Young adults, insurance coverage as dependents, age limit extension; Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010; Housing : First-time home purchase, tax credit; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; New York : Democratic Party events; New York : President's visits; New York : Recession, effects; Taxation : Tax cuts, budgetary effects; Taxation : Tax relief; Treasury, Department of the : Troubled Asset Relief Program; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding.

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